

# Numbers Versus Narratives in Israel-Palestine

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## Brief Analysis

To paraphrase Daniel Patrick Moynihan, everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but not their own numbers. After a bloody week earlier this month in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, emotions all around the world are running high, with recriminations flying on both sides of the argument regarding whether Israel used excessive force in defending its frontier with Gaza from thousands of Palestinian demonstrators. And yet, what can some of the numbers tell us about that week's events, and more important, about how Israelis and Palestinians view recent developments?

First and most obviously are the numbers cited from the Gaza Strip itself. May 14 was to be the culmination of seven weeks of protests billed as the "march of return," with Gazans demonstrating on the border fence separating the coastal territory from Israel. Just days prior Hamas leader Yahya al-Sinwar promised "hundreds of thousands" of demonstrators descending on the border, an assessment that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) viewed with both credulity and alarm. In the end, an estimated 45,000 Gazans came out on May 14—only a slight increase from the first Friday (March 30) of demonstrations.

These protestors were, admittedly, spread out among twelve different sites up and down Gaza, in contrast to the previous five, posing a more complicated security dilemma. Yet the real difference, as the IDF maintains, was in the ferocity and aggressiveness of the actions against the border fence—necessitating a more lethal military response (primarily via targeted sniper fire). Over sixty protestors were killed—in contrast to the first Friday's nineteen—of which, as one Hamas leader later declared after heavy domestic criticism, fifty were members of the group (with an additional three claimed by Palestinian Islamic Jihad). At least a thousand additional protestors were injured. For their part, the IDF and Shin Bet stated that twenty-four of those killed were verified militants from various factions. Most interesting perhaps was the fact that the worst scenario did not come to pass: Gazans never rushed the fence en masse, in the tens of thousands.

The following day, May 15, was Nakba Day—traditionally a date of increased clashes between Palestinian demonstrators and Israeli security forces. Despite the sixty funerals taking place in Gaza, the turnout that afternoon was extremely low: an estimated 4,000 all across the territory. Even lower numbers were in evidence by the end of

the week, the first Friday of Ramadan. Nakba Day did witness three instances of live fire by Gaza-based militants against Israel (in one case against the nearby town of Sderot), a relatively rare occurrence in the absence of large-scale violent demonstrations. Indeed, throughout the week not a single rocket was fired against Israel.

These data points point to one overarching conclusion: Hamas controls nearly everything taking place inside Gaza according to its own lights, and for its own political reasons there are either demonstrations (or not), live fire (or not), and rockets (or not). The live fire on Nakba Day was, in itself, likely a message to Israel that while the protests may have ebbed, the group does maintain the option of military escalation—disastrous though it may be for the people of Gaza.

The rest of Israel, Jerusalem, and the West Bank observed the week's events, it has to be admitted, with apparent apathy: not just the bloodshed on the Israel-Gaza border, but also the U.S. embassy move to Jerusalem and Nakba Day. The week began with, on Sunday morning (May 13), a reported 2,000 messianic Jewish Israelis ascending to Jerusalem's Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif, an eternal trigger point. Video of small scuffles between Muslim worshippers and Israeli police went viral, and yet here too the worst did not come to pass. When Jerusalem Day festivities were held later to commemorate the Israeli conquest of East Jerusalem in 1967, they were the quietest in years, including the provocative "Flag March" through the Arab Quarter of the Old City. No Palestinian counter-protestors were visible near Sultan Suleiman Street opposite Damascus Gate, and unlike years past, nearby shops and restaurants remained open.

This trend continued the following day, even during the high-profile unveiling ceremony for the U.S. embassy. According to the Israeli police, a mere 100 protestors, including several Arab parliamentarians, demonstrated in Jerusalem's Arnona neighborhood. A general strike called by the Higher Arab Monitoring Committee the next day, in solidarity with Gaza, also appeared to pass with little incident or mass turnout. The only Arab Israeli demonstrations that did make a public impact occurred in Haifa later in the week, involving perhaps several hundred on two occasions. And this was primarily due to the overly harsh police response, with over twenty arrests (including one Arab Israeli activist who alleged that police broke his knee while he was in detention).

Tens of thousands of Jewish Israelis did come out on the evening of May 14 to central Tel Aviv's Rabin Square, but only to celebrate the country's recent victory in the Eurovision song competition. Conspicuous by its absence was any form of mass protest by the Israeli left—an indication, perhaps, of its diminishing influence in Israeli politics, as well as the high degree of public support and understanding for the IDF's handling of the border marches.

Most surprising, though, was the apathy with which the West Bank—and Palestinian Authority—responded to the week's events. Demonstrations planned for May 14 only drew an estimated 2,000 protestors across a dozen locations in the West Bank, and the PA did not give the day off to its civil servants. Given the high death toll in Gaza and the confluence of Nakba Day, the fear was that the West Bank was headed for escalation. Yet despite the PA's calls for a general strike and mourning period, the same number of demonstrators (2,000) came out on May 15, with one fatality—a fifteen-year-old boy—reported from the ensuing clashes. This was in sharp contrast to the tens of thousands of protestors drawn to Gaza solidarity rallies in places such as Istanbul and Rabat.

The reasons for this lack of mobilization are likely varied. In the IDF's view, the only numbers that matter to West Bank Palestinians can be found in the various work and Ramadan entry permits issued by Israeli authorities—indicators of stability and, for Palestinians, relative economic and social normalcy. Over 40,000 West Bankers entered Jerusalem for the first Friday prayers of Ramadan, with no major incidents reported.

Another reason is surely the PA's own actions: failing to mobilize its Fatah cadres to take to the streets on the one hand, and effective control by the PA security forces on the other. Despite paying lip service to the idea of Palestinian unity, the PA likely did not want to destabilize its own backyard in the West Bank on behalf of what it considers a

breakaway province ruled by its rival, Hamas. Indeed, the most telling aspect of the entire week could be Hamas's increasingly abject position in the West Bank: dozens of its members were killed in a single day, yet the movement could not even muster a serious demonstration—let alone a solitary terrorist attack—in response.

Ultimately, given that Gaza remains the center of attention, the numbers are telling: about what changed and, more to the point, what did not. The high death toll on the border did focus global attention on the harsh humanitarian conditions inside Gaza, an eye-watering data set that, taken together, moved the United Nations to declare that the territory would be uninhabitable by 2020. Egypt responded by opening its Rafah border crossing for the entire month of Ramadan. The Israeli government, in line with the IDF's recommendation, rapidly reopened its own Kerem Shalom border crossing with Gaza, despite the major damage caused by Palestinian rioters recently. (Israel's defense minister previously stated it would take "months" to repair the crossing.) Trucks carrying medical and humanitarian aid flowed in, and supplies of diesel fuel and cooking gas were set to be renewed. In addition, more than two dozen injured Gazans were allowed to transfer to hospitals in Jordan and Egypt.

While underwhelming, these changes point to a positive trend that needs to be built on. Gaza's troubles—primarily economic and social—cannot simply be ignored, lest they explode outward again. The May 29 escalation of hostilities between Israel and Gaza-based militants is further proof of the combustible politics surrounding the beleaguered territory. At the same time, the lack of major response earlier this month in Israel, Jerusalem, and the West Bank—and the understated turnout inside Gaza—may demonstrate something else: that even in the most politicized place on Earth, many people simply crave stability and normalcy rather than the endless bloodshed usually on offer. ❖

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